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AUTHOR	Repetto, Jeanne
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ABSTRACT

Families in urban areas struggle with drug abuse, poverty, increasing housing costs, and lack of affordable child care. The challenges confronting urban schools include a higher dropout rate, higher youth unemployment, and the need to address a variety of special needs of their student population, such as programs for pregnant students, dropouts, at-risk students, and substance abuse prevention. Urban schools need to coordinate or broker the myriad of services necessary to assist students in their increasingly complex environment. Such partnerships often strengthen community support for special programs for economically disadvantaged and academically at-risk youth. The literature indicates that successful programs are characterized by high expectations, strong leadership, a broad range of instructional programs, autonomy and flexibility in program planning, and a broad range of social and economic opportunities. Ten characteristics of successful urban career-oriented high schools are safe and orderly environment; businesslike attitude; warm and caring environment; admissions process based on student interest; dual mission--to prepare students for a career and college; high expectations; curriculum organized around an industry or discrete set of subjects; integration of theory and practice; strong linkages theory and practice; strong linkages with business; and inspiring, sensitive, and firm leadership. (The unique aspects of six effective programs are reviewed. Fifteen references are cited.) (YLB)

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TASPP BRIEF

Technical Assistance for Special Populations Program

Volume 2 Number 4

ISSUES IN URBAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

by Jeanne Repetto, Ph.D.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Urban areas face many challenges as the 20th century comes to a close. These challenges include declines in populations, social services, federal funding, and tax revenues (Ascher, Riehl, & Price, 1986). Concurrent with these declines are increases in immigrant populations, single parent families, drug use, teen parents, and homeless populations (Ascher, 1987; Hill, Wise, & Shapiro, 1989). Urban areas have been forced into a precarious balancing act by these declines and increases. *The problems facing urban America necessitate changes in the role of the education system addressing its needs.* This TASPP BRIEF discusses changes in urban settings as they relate to urban vocational education programs. Effective urban vocational education programs are highlighted.

Problems Confronting Urban Families and Educators

In spite of the apparent success of urban renewal efforts, many families in urban areas struggle with problems which compromise their ability to ensure successful outcomes for their children. A recent study conducted by the National League of Cities identified the following problems confronting today's children and families in urban America (Born, 1989).

- U.S. high school and college students and young adults use illicit drugs to a greater extent than young people in any other industrialized nation in the world.
- One in five children lives in poverty.
- Housing costs have accelerated three times faster than incomes.
- Seventy-five percent of this country's mothers and fifty-seven percent of the fathers find it difficult to locate child care.

Dropout Rate

Statistics highlighting outcomes for youth in urban areas document the challenge confronting urban schools. In its second annual report to Congress, the National Center for Education Statistics found that students residing in central cities were more likely to drop out than were students in nonurban schools (Kaufman & Frase, 1990). In many urban schools up to half of all students entering the ninth grade fail to graduate four years later (Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987).

Youth Unemployment

Urban youth and particularly minority youth in urban areas suffer higher unemployment rates than their nonurban counterparts. The Council of the Great City Schools (1987) reported the following unemployment rates for youth age 16 to 19 in 1986:

- Black youth in central cities 43.2%
- All youth in central cities 23.6%
- All youth in suburban areas 14.9%

Students with Special Needs

Urban educators are charged with a task that differs significantly from that of their nonurban counterparts. Urban schools must address a variety of special needs in their student population. Programming efforts in many urban schools reflect the

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characteristics, needs, and problems of a high percentage of students. A survey of public education in urban school districts conducted by the National School Boards Association (1989) found that of fifty-two responding urban districts:

- Thirty-eight districts reported having programs for pregnant and parenting students.
- Thirty-eight districts indicated that they had programs to assist dropouts to obtain high school diplomas or its equivalency.
- Half of the districts indicated that they had departments which were formed to work with students who were at risk of dropping out of school.
- All but two responding school systems offered student support services and substance abuse prevention education.

The Need for Intercollaboration

Coordinating Necessary Services

Urban schools need to coordinate or broker the myriad of services necessary to assist students in their increasingly complex environment. Cooperative efforts with outside agencies enable the educational system to meet the changing needs of the community through a wider range of services. In response to the need for collaborative school reform, outside agencies and public schools have increasingly entered into formal and informal partnerships. In a report examining the impact of such partnerships on at-risk youth, McMullan and Snyder (1987) concluded that such partnerships often strengthen community interest in education and support for special programs for economically disadvantaged and academically at-risk youth.

Strengthening Community Support for Special Programs

> Through their participation in collaborations, business leaders have learned the critical issues facing urban public education and begun to appreciate the complexities of educating thousands of primarily poor, urban minority youth for a successful transition to the labor force. By becoming better informed, community business leaders have become advocates for education in their communities. (p.61)

Successful Reform Efforts

In almost every urban area across the country, evidence of school reform can be found. A review of the effective practices literature indicates that successful programs are characterized by the following (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988; Council of the Great City Schools, 1987; Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987; Oakes, 1987; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989; Wilensky & Kline, 1988):

- high expectations for all students and a positive school climate in which every child can succeed
- strong leadership from district personnel, principals, teachers, and members of the business community
- a broad range of instructional programs, real-life incentives for achievement, and strong linkages between school curriculum and real-life situations in the urban community
- autonomy and flexibility in program planning which allows each school to react to the needs of its community
- a broad range of social and economic opportunities provided through linkages between the school system and businesses, social services, families, and other institutions

Factors associated with the success of urban career-oriented high schools were identified in a recent study conducted by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (Mitchell, Russell, Benson, Chambers, & Just, 1989). The nine programs examined in this study exhibited the following evidence of success: more students applied for the program than there were available slots, attendance rates

were high for both students and teachers, dropout rates were low, few discipline problems existed, and students tended to be successful upon graduation. Program success was found to be associated with the following ten factors:

Characteristics of Successful Urban Career-Oriented High Schools

- safe and orderly environment
- businesslike attitude on the part of teachers and students
- warm and caring environment
- admissions process based on student interest
- dual mission — to prepare students for a career and college
- high expectations for students to succeed
- curriculum organized around an industry or discrete set of subjects
- integration of theory and practice
- strong linkages with business
- inspiring, sensitive, and firm leadership from the principals

Effective Programs

The unique aspects of several programs are reviewed below to illustrate the use of effective practices in vocational programs. These programs are offered as evidence of the promise in America's urban vocational programs.

Substitute Vocational Assistant (SVA) Program, New York Public Schools: Designed to increase the number of qualified vocational instructors and to assist graduates, the SVA program pays qualified graduates nine-tenths of a beginning teacher's salary. SVAs attend college at night and alternate during the day between teaching and working in industry. Certified vocational instructors serve as mentors, assisting SVAs in their teaching assignments. The Board of Education pays tuition cost and each SVA receives full union benefits. SVAs completing the five year program become certified vocational instructors (Mitchell, Russell, Benson, Chambers, & Just, 1989).

School/Community Project, Milwaukee School System: Dropouts and students at risk of dropping out are provided basic skills training, job finding skills training, vocational education programs, special counseling, and tutoring through this project. Nontraditional settings such as Urban League offices, low-income housing projects, and churches are used to house programs with 25 to 75 students in grades 7 through 12 (Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987).

Youth Collaborative, Cincinnati School System: This civic organization was formed to develop a comprehensive plan for education in Cincinnati, from preschool to college admission and job placement, and to restructure the school's relationship with the community. Members include chief executive officers, university presidents, church leaders, and political interest groups. Teacher unions, school administration, and school boards are included on committees to ensure their representation (Hill, Wise, & Shapiro, 1989).

Oakland Street Academy, Oakland Public Schools: This alternative storefront school has been serving school dropouts since 1973. Students attend staff meetings and participate in decision making. A self-paced curriculum emphasizes job skills and attitudes and/or college preparation (Wells, 1990).

Kid's Diner, Baltimore Public Schools: Juniors and seniors in food service, business education, horticulture, and construction trades work on a week-on/week-off schedule at this community-based work /study site. Students are responsible for setting up and operating all aspects of the business. This hands-on approach allows students to learn job specific skills as well as general work knowledge. Each graduate has no fewer than two full-time job offers (Council of the Great City Schools, 1987).

Technical Education Center, Denver Community College: The Center offers programs ranging from life coping skills to word processing to lathe-mill operation. Most students are sponsored by business, industry, and labor. The program's success is evidenced by the employer waiting list for graduates, an 86% program completion rate, and a 76% job placement rate in training related jobs. Cooperative efforts between JTPA, the county school districts, the department of social services, and employers are central to the program's success (Wilensky & Kline, 1988).

Summary

Assisting youth in the transition from school to the world outside of school is a complex effort beyond the resources of one institution. This realization has fostered partnerships that have caused schools to become a part of the larger

community. It is only through these partnerships that urban education can begin to solve its problems and realize its promise. The programs reviewed here are by no means inclusive. In every city across the nation, unique programs attempting to solve the issues surrounding urban education are being planned or are already underway.

Jeanne Repetto is a Visiting Assistant Professor and Director of the Florida Network: Information and Services for Adolescents and Adults with Special Needs in the Department of Special Education, University of Florida, Gainesville. Her research interests include transition, training, information dissemination, and research related to teachers as change agents. She can be reached at University of Florida, Department of Special Education, G315 Norman Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611, (904) 392-0701.

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National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California, Berkeley

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Technical Assistance for Special Populations Program (TASPP)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Site

Address all comments, questions, requests for additional copies to:
Dr. Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein, TASPP Director
345 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820 (217) 333-0807

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National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California, Berkeley

TASPP
345 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
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